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PHONETICS AS A BASIS FOR TEACHING SPANISH

By FRED A. HAMANN

OF LATE years the modern foreign languages are being taught more and more like living languages; hence, more attention is being paid to pronunciation, for the first thing to be studied in a modern language is not its grammar but its phonetics, that is, its sounds and their combinations in connected speech, as this furnishes the only scientific and practical basis for acquiring, as well as for teaching the standard pronunciation of a given language.

The teacher, therefore, especially if using the direct or a conversational method, should first give a very large amount of phonetic drill; for if the student fails to overcome at the very outset the natural inertia of undisciplined muscles, he will simply use slipshod approximations, that is, he will substitute the sounds of his mother tongue, and his further progress will chiefly consist in learning to pronounce badly with greater ease, without being aware of his vocal atrocities. Thus the law of habit will not aid, but only hinder him in the mastery of a correct pronunciation, and a faulty pronunciation will result, which is not only difficult to correct, but which, in turn, would deprive the student of much pleasure and above all of his confidence in learning to speak and sing in the foreign tongue, as well as to appreciate in the highest degree such literary forms as poetry, drama, and the oration. Consequently, the beginner should be given first of all a solid foundation for the correct production of the foreign sounds by means of physiological explanations and phonetic drill in at least five to ten lessons before the systematic study of grammar is taken up, and afterwards in connection with the latter, preferably at the beginning of the lesson for a few minutes, in order to tune up the organs of speech. Now, all this is being urged more and more for French, but seldom for Spanish. For this reason, I shall endeavor to show the imperative need of Spanish phonetics, in acquiring and imparting the Castilian pronunciation, by trying to bring out the main differences between the Spanish basis of articulation and

that of English with occasional references to those of French and German; for a mistaken notion is abroad that a correct Spanish pronunciation is easy to attain, and that the spelling of Spanish words is more phonetic than it really is. The faulty and often intolerable pronunciation of the majority of Spanish students points to the advisability of using practical phonetics in Spanish also, in order to avoid employing certain sounds of one's mother tongue in Castilian pronunciation, which is favored by the vast majority as the standard of Spanish for the following reasons: (1) The Royal Academy of Spain, as well as the literary and educated men of practically all Spanish countries consider Castilian as the standard. (2) The American pronunciation of Spanish has no single standard but is readily understood by all, and vice versa, one who speaks Castilian can easily acquire the dialect of any Spanish country. (3) It facilitates the acquisition of correct spelling, being more phonetic, as the sounds of 'c,' 'z' and 'j' are distinguished from 's' and 'g.' I shall base my assertions in what follows on Mr. Tomás Navarro Tomás' excellent book '*Pronunciación Española*,' which, in my opinion, contains perhaps the most practical and popular presentation of the subject, and to a lesser degree on Mr. A. Colton's treatise '*La Phonétique Castellane*' which is more theoretical.

I regret to state, however, that Mr. Tomás does not use the International Phonetic Alphabet, with which the majority of teachers no doubt have become familiar thru the study of French, German and English. Now many will say that phonetic symbols are entirely out of place in the classroom. I, however, consider their use essential for the teacher and desirable for the student, as one of the greatest phonetic aids, especially in comparing Spanish sounds with those of other languages. Moreover, there are already several good beginners' books on the market in which not only a good phonetic introduction is found, but also the International Phonetic Alphabet, among them Hanssler and Parmenter's Beginners' Spanish and Moreno-Lacalle's *Elementos de Español*, as well as his Elements of Spanish Pronunciation, which contains also a carefully worked out plan of ten lessons on pronunciation with many exercises.

I hope the day is not far off when a unanimous agreement shall have been reached whereby this alphabet is to be used exclusively

for the purpose of standardizing the phonetic transcription of all modern languages.

Now, there is a certain degree of confusion, as well as disagreement among the best known authorities on the subject of Spanish pronunciation, which, according to Colton, seems to be due to the fact that the Castilian pronunciation appears to be in a period of transition with respect to the pronunciation of a number of vowels and consonants, as well as to quantity and division of syllables. However, Josselyn is rather inclined to attribute it to the Spanish basis of articulation, which is more lax than that of any other Romance language. He says, for example, at the very outset of his *Études de phonétique espagnole* that this lax articulation leads to a considerable variation in the pronunciation of the same individual and tends to render the absolute classification of vowels difficult. On the other hand, it is this characteristic that, in my opinion, permits the Spanish articulation to become so harmonious, elegant, and soft.

The action of the organs of speech is, in general, less energetic in Spanish than in French and in the stressed syllables of English and German, but much more precise and definite, especially in the pronunciation of the vowels, than in the weakly stressed syllables of English words, in which, as a rule, only the consonants are sounded distinctly, the vowels being slurred over and even dropped, whereas in Spanish the vowels remain clear and full, but the consonants become lax. This may be seen by comparing the Spanish with the English pronunciation of the following words, which have the same spelling and meaning in both languages: *honor*, *pastor*, *vulgar*, *universal*, *adorable*, cf. also pronunciation (E.): *pronunciación* (S.). This clear-cut articulation of Spanish is due, in my opinion, to the manner of expelling breath in the production of the Spanish sounds, more uniformly and less intermittently than in English. On the other hand this uniformity in expelling breath accounts for the greater uniformity of Spanish vowels with respect to quality and quantity, as well as for the absence of the vanishing sound which is so characteristic of the English long vowels, as in 'too, know, say, see.' Compare with these the Spanish words: *tú*, *no*, *sé*, *sí*. Though in Spanish orthography there are only the five elementary vowels 'u,' 'o,' 'a,' 'e,' 'i' ('y' being pronounced like 'i' when it is a vowel) which are usually

represented in phonetic transcription by [u], [o], [a], [e], [i], still there exist also in Castilian, different shades of these vowels, especially of the vowels 'e' and 'o.' However, for practical purposes in the classroom the various shades, which Araujo calls 'matices flotantes' and 'fugaces variantes' may be safely ignored in ordinary transcription, as they are not distinctive varieties, as in English, French, and German, being occasioned by the accent, the adjoining consonant, the vowel in the next syllable, etc.

Nevertheless, a few general rules like the following might be given: At the end of a stressed syllable the Spanish vowels are regularly 'close,' that is [u], [o], [e], [i], as in the English words 'rule,' 'so,' 'they,' machine' without becoming, however, as tense and long as in the strongly stressed English vowels, for there is less lip rounding for the vowels [u] and [o], it being more a case of interior than exterior rounding; cf. too (E.): tú (S.), no (E.): no (S.). For [e] and [i] the corners of the mouth are not so much retracted; cf. they (E.): té (S.); me (E.): mí (S.). On the other hand, in stressed syllables ending in a consonant, the vowels are pronounced 'open,' that is more as in the English words 'put,' 'or,' 'there,' 'is.' Cf. *tu-bo* [u]: *pun-to* [U], *mo-da* [o]: *cos-ta* [ɔ], *me-sa* [e]: *papel* [ɛ], *si-no* [i]: *tín-ta* [I]. However, 'e' in a syllable closed by 'n' or 's' is close, i.e., [e], as in *a-ten-to*, *pes-ca*, while 'e' and 'o' before the 'i' and 'y' are open, i.e., [ɛ], [ɔ], as in *reina*, *rey*, *oiga*, *soy*. The vowel 'a' is pronounced like 'a' in 'father' before the consonants 'j' and 'g,' before the vowels 'o' and 'u,' as well as in a syllable closed by 'l,' as in *bajo*, *pago*, *caos*, *causa*, *mal*; otherwise 'a' is usually sounded as in 'bath,' 'ask.' Between stressed syllables vowels become still more lax, but they remain clear and definite and do not become so indistinct as in English, where any unstressed vowel may become [ə], or disappear, as in *tí-tu-lo*, *sím-bo-lo*, cf. 'symbol' [simbl], *tím-pa-no*, *in-tér-pre-te*, *tí-mi-do*. According to the law of vowel harmony, which is the influence that a vowel in a syllable exercises upon the vowel in the preceding syllable, the weakly stressed final vowels 'a' and 'o' close the accented vowel of the preceding syllable ('a' more than 'o'), so that in *esa*, *eso*, *ese*, for instance, the accented 'e' has three distinct shades, without failing to be close in the three cases; cf. also *so-la*: *so-lo*. Another sign of laxity is also found in the articulation of the frequent sounds for 'u' and 'i' ('y'), without the

accent mark, before a vowel, when they become the semi-vowels [w], [j], as in *cual* [w], labial [j].

The action of the glottis is not very energetic either and no glottal stop precedes the initial vowels as in German; hence there is a tendency in vowel linking to convert two or three adjoining vowels into a monosyllabic group without losing the characteristic shade of each vowel as in *la unión: laurel, yo he ido a Europa*. Two vowels of the same kind regularly form a single vowel in ordinary speech, as in *la Habana, que el, alcohol, ángulo oscuro*; while in rapid speech, as well as in singing, weakly stressed vowels are regularly absorbed, for the stronger the syllabic accent, the more likely is the vowel to disappear, as 'e' in *sabe usted, de otra manera, me ha visto*.

Altho nasalization of vowels does not play a very important part, having no distinctive value, the vowels in certain positions, especially between nasal consonants, are frequently nasalized, pointing to a lax position of the uvula, as in *nunca* [n̄], *monte* [õ], *manco* [ã], *nño* [ɲ̄], *enfermo* [ẽ].

Vowel quantity obeys phonetic laws in Spanish, does not follow historic or etymological traditions, and does not serve to distinguish words from each other as in English *hip: heap; let: late*. Hence, it will be found that vowels are not lengthened to the same extent as those of other languages. English speaking people usually exaggerate the length of Spanish vowels, especially in 'palabras agudas' which are stressed on the last syllable, like *comer, esperó*.

Owing to the smaller tension of the vocal chords the general pitch of Spanish sounds is much lower than in French.

The most careful attention, however, is needed in the articulation of the Spanish consonants. In the first place, for most consonants requiring tongue action, especially for 't', 'd', 'n', 'z', 's', 'r', 'l', the tongue is further advanced than for the corresponding English sound.

The degree of muscular tension with which the consonants are articulated varies likewise according to the accent, the varying impulse in breathing, and their position in the phonetic group, being greater at the beginning as well as in stressed syllables, smaller between vowels, and smallest at the end, as well as in weak syllables, as in *cierto, certidumbre, lápiz, rama, para, amar, jamás, lunes, mal, nacen, de, seda, sed*.

Initial consonants of a phonetic group are pronounced not only with greater force but at the same time with greater sonority. Thus, for initial 'b,' 'd,' and 'g' after a pause, the vocal chords begin to vibrate before the explosion takes place, as in French, thus, *bueno*, *don*, *gana*.

It must be remembered that also 'b,' as well as 'v' after 'n' or 'm' (both being pronounced m)=[b], that 'd' after 'n' or 'l'=[d], and that 'g' after 'n,' [ŋ]=[g], as in *un buen vino*, *hombre*, *un día*, *el domingo*, cf. *tan bien*: *también*.

However, for medial 'b,' 'd,' 'g' between vowels in a phonetic group, as well as with most consonants, the air passage is more gently opened without any explosion, so that a kind of semi-fricative sound results, as in *usted ha dado una dedada de miel al abogado*, *una gabarda*, *madre*, *habla*. Concerning these sounds, Navarro Tomás says that they are commonly ignored, even by many teachers, and that he who has not mastered them will always be far from the correct pronunciation. He also warns against the English 'th' sound of 'this' for intervocalic 'd,' since the latter is less interdental, more lax, softer, and shorter than this 'th' sound, which, by the way, occurs also in Spanish in words like *juzgar*, due to the influence of the following voiced consonant.

Final 'd' followed by a pause is particularly weak and becomes almost voiceless, as in *usted*, *libertad*, *Madrid*.

Since less energy and breath are expended in the pronunciation of Castilian consonants in general, the occlusives [p], [t], [k] are not aspirated, like [p^h], [t^h], [k^h], as in English, German, and American Spanish, but uttered more as in French, as in *tapioca*, *capital*, *petaca*. In unaccented syllables, especially before nasal or dental consonants, like 'm,' 'd,' these consonants are often weakened to the semi-fricatives [b], [d], [g], being more or less voiced, as in *aritmética*, *anécdota*, *eclipsar*, also in 'cc,' as in *acción*, and 'x' between vowels=[g s] or [s], as in *éxito*, *examen*, while in many cases these consonants, as well as many others, are dropped in correct pronunciation and often in spelling, in order to avoid awkward consonant combinations, as in *septiembre*, *sé(p)-tímo*, (*p*)seudo, *psicología*, o(*b*)scuro, su(*b*)scri(*p*)ción, *instrucción*, *istmo*, *exponer*, *exclamar*, also *exacto* [s], *auxil-* [s], cf. *sujeto*: *subject*.

Medial 's' before 'f' and 'z' is partly absorbed by the latter, as in *esfera*, *escena*.

Due to the decreasing impulse of breath the friction and sonority of a final consonant become very weak, in fact often stop, so that no sound is heard altho the tongue takes the required position for the production of the same, as in *usted*, *cok*, *bock*, *reloj*: *relojes*, but *álbum*=*algun*, *harem* [*n*] or *harén*, cf. *Adán*: *Adam* (E), final 'm' being pronounced like 'n'; also in slowly syllabifying the word, as *em-pe-ra-dor*.

Assimilation, that is, the influence of other sounds, as we have already seen, plays a very great part in Castilian. While with the vowels it is metaphonic assimilation, or vowel harmony, with consonants it is the influence of contact that is most important. Thus, a voiceless consonant becomes voiced before a voiced consonant, as in *desde* [*zd*], *los dedos*, *mismo*, *isla*, *diezmo*, *juzgar*, *la luz del sol*, *aritmética*, *anecdota*.

'b' and 'd' before an occlusive become [*p*] and [*t*], or more frequently retain a slight element of voicing, as in *obtener*, *adquirir*, also in *adjetivo*. Hence assimilation is, as a rule, regressive in Spanish, as in French, whereas it is progressive in English, cf. *observar* [*ps*] (S.): *observer* [*ps*] (F.): *observe* [*bz*] (E.)

It is also due to economy of effort that whenever possible the consonant takes the lip position required by the vowel following it, as in *ni*, *no*, *tu*, *te*, *si*, *su*, etc.

Also two adjoining consonants are usually uttered with one effort of the organs of speech by shifting the place of articulation, as may be seen from the following cases:

1) 'n,' 'l,' 's' take the point of articulation of the following consonant: *donde*, *once*; *alto*, *alzar*; *esta*, *escena*, *esfera*.

2) 'n' before 'f' changes to a sound which is formed between lip and teeth, like [*f*], while breath is passing thru nose, as for [*m*]: *enfermo*.

3) 'n' before 'b,' 'v,' and 'p' becomes [*m*]: *un buen padre*, *invierno* ('nv'=[*mb*]).

4) 'n' before 'ch'=[*ɲ*] = 'ñ': *ancho*.

5) 'n' before [*g*], [*k*], [*x*],=[*ŋ*] (= 'ng' in 'sing'): *un gran conjuéz*.

6) 'n' before 'm' is absorbed by the latter: *inmenso*, *con mucho*.

7) 'l' before 'ch'=[*č*] (ll in *llama*): *colcha*.

8) 'y' and 'hi' after 'n' and 'l' become the occlusive sound of 'gy' in 'Magyar' (Hungarian), which is similar to the sound of 'g' in 'gentle' (E.) and for which many foreigners simply substitute 'd' + 'y,' or 'di' in 'cordial': un yerno, el yerno, con *hierro*.

9) 't' and 'd' after 'z' become interdental, as in *hazte acá*, sobre la *haz de la tierra*.

The lack of a fixed place of articulation becomes also apparent in the case of [k] and [x], upon which the vowels have regressive influence, being articulated farthest back before 'u' and farthest in front before 'i.' Nevertheless, [x] never becomes the German 'ch' sound [ç] in 'ich': *dirigir, gente, jamás, jota, junta*.

On the other hand, the consonants [x], [k], [g], [n], [l], [r] have regressive influence on the preceding vowel, tending to make it more open, as in *fije* [i], *coje* [ɔ], *seco* [ɛ], *cinco* [ɪ], *hungaro* [u], *el polo, perro, perder*.

Two identical consonants coming together, just like two identical vowels, require only one articulation, being however, slightly longer and divided between the two syllables, while a single consonant between two vowels in a stress group is carried over to the next syllable, as *innumerable: inhumano, un nombre: un hombre, el loro: el oro, obvio, los señores, la luz cenital, la juventud dorada*, cf. *carro: caro*. However, in strong and emphatic pronunciation, especially where the intervocalic consonant is [n], [l], [r], [s], [θ], [ʃ], or [x], the articulation is divided between the two syllables, without producing the effect of a double consonant, as heard in *un niño*; thus, *uno, ala, pasa, dice, café, caja*, cf. *la sabes: las aves*.

A very common mistake, however, is made by Americans in changing 'ñ' to [n] + [j], and 'll' to [l] + [j], and by dividing them between the two syllables, as in *señor, silla*, when they are pronounced [*sen-jor, sil-ja*] instead of [*se-ɲor, si-lla*].

Similarly, 'ch' is usually described as a sound composed of [tʃ] + [ʃ]. However, it must not be forgotten that occlusion and friction are momentary cf. *mucho: much* (E.). Therefore, the digraph 'ch,' as well as 'll,' is not divided in syllabication, as in *Ba-chi-ller*.

The sound that is perhaps responsible for the most serious and common mistake, especially among English speaking people, is the Spanish 'r.' At the beginning of a word, also after 'n,' 'l,'

and 's,' as well as if doubled, it is regularly trilled and represented by [r], as in *rico*, *Enrique*, *malrotar*, *israelita*, *ferrocarril*. However, in all other cases 'r' consists of a single vibration, or stroke of the tongue point against the upper gums (the alveoles). Since the place of articulation for the Spanish 'r' sound and English 'd' is nearly the same, I regularly begin with the English word 'today' by eliminating [ə] and pronouncing 'd' very quickly, thus [təde: tde]. By adding 'n' and 's' we get the Spanish words *tren* and *tres*. Similarly [də] or [d] may be substituted for 'r' in words like the following: *parte*=[pad(ə)te], *para*=[pada]. In familiar pronunciation this 'r' becomes fricative, sounding like intervocalized 'd' articulated at the alveoles, but not like the 'hollow' American 'r'; cf. *toro*: *todo*, *tomar*: *tomad*: *to mar* (E.).

While these are only a few of the important facts about Spanish pronunciation that are worthy of the careful consideration of the teacher, I hope that they will suffice to convince him that a thoro study of Spanish phonetics offers the best practical basis for acquiring and teaching the standard pronunciation of Spanish.

*South Division High School,
Milwaukee, Wisconsin.*